

CASE STUDY

Dementia beckons as more live longer

By Nick Miller

A boy born in Australia today should live to celebrate his 79th birthday, and a girl her 83rd, according to the latest life expectancy figures, released yesterday.

However, this longer than ever lifespan is also more likely to end in Alzheimer's disease, which caused significantly more deaths in 2007 than in 2006.

The biggest killers by far are cancer and heart disease, the Australian Bureau of Statistics show. Cancer killed 22 383 men and 17 269 women in 2006 — a slight increase on the year before. Heart disease killed 17 955 men and 22 618 women — almost 3 per cent up on the year before.

Deaths from diseases of the nervous system increased by 12.5 per cent, with most of the rise due to a jump in Alzheimer's-caused deaths — from 1940 in 2006 to 2252 the following year.

The director of the national ageing research institute at Melbourne University, Professor David Ames, said some of the increase in Alzheimer's-caused deaths could be due to doctors getting better at recognising the underlying cause of death.

'Someone with Alzheimer's is more likely to die of pneumonia or from a fall or accident, and that may be the immediate cause of death; but the underlying cause is their dementia,' he said. 'The large increase probably reflects that doctors are being more realistic.'

However, there was no doubt that Alzheimer's was also on the rise. 'The chances of having dementia Page 276every five years after age 60, and more and more people are surviving into that age group,' Professor Ames said.

There are 58 000 people with dementia or Alzheimer's in Victoria, but that number is predicted to grow to 84 000 by 2020.

On average, the life expectancy at birth has increased by about six years for men and four years for women since 1987.

Just six people per 1000 Australians die each year. In 1987, the rate was 9.1 deaths per 1000 people.

Source: The Age, 26 November 2008.

Case study review

1. Identify the two main causes of death for men and women.

2 marks

2. Explain how Alzheimer's disease is having an impact on death rates.

2 marks

3. What are the chances of developing Alzheimer's disease?

1 mark

4. How common is Alzheimer's disease in Victoria?

1 mark

